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I would like to thank Senator Jagler and Senate Education Committee members for the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of WiRSA (Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance)

My name is Jeff Eide. I am the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance (WiRSA). Our organization represents and supports over 240 members, which includes 178 rural school districts.

Our organization is registering in opposition to SB 335.

A little about my background. I became the executive director of WiRSA on July 1, 2022. Prior to leading WiRSA, I was an acting superintendent, licensed by DPI to act in that role. Prior to becoming a superintendent, I was a principal, associate principal, gifted and talented coordinator, health and physical education teacher, and adaptive physical education teacher. In addition to my educational positions, I also coached over 25 years and was a football head coach for 15 years.

Rural school district administrators play numerous roles, many of which would have varying levels of licensure, and many are covered by a district administrator license. With my experience and licensure, I was able to provide the flexibility and support needed to serve all the needs of my school district.

During my tenure as superintendent, I was also the technology coordinator, and in many cases, I was IT support because we could only afford to have our IT person in-house two days a week. I evaluated staff through our educator effectiveness program. For a short period of time, when we did not have a director of special education, I stepped in to take on that role as well. It should be noted that a number of rural superintendents need to take on the director of special education or an elementary, middle, or high school principal position on a permanent basis because of numbers, needs, and mandates. Also, as superintendent, there were times I needed to step in as a special education teacher, technology education teacher, math teacher, English teacher, and middle school teacher when the need arose. Was I in these classrooms full-time? No, I was not, but due to the shortage of substitute teachers, there were times I needed to be in the classroom. Because I was a DPI-licensed district administrator, I was able to ensure no classroom was without a teacher by acting as a legal, licensed K-12 teacher for a few hours a day or an extended period of time if needed. If I had not been certified, and something unfortunate happened while supervising these areas, I could have set my school district up for possible litigation. In addition to these duties, I also obtained my school bus license to support the shortage of bus drivers. Rural school district leaders do these things out of necessity and what is important for the community and kids. The crucial point is that I could not have assumed these roles, critical to a school district's proper functioning, without appropriate licensure.

Leadership

A school district administrator needs to both manage and lead their school district. The superintendent manages by creating structures in a system that allows that organization to run efficiently, effectively, and legally. A superintendent leads by motivating, influencing, and empowering all staff and educational partners to contribute to student success. Strong leadership can be the difference between an average educational system and one that is growing and fulfilling its mission to give every student the best possible education to reach their potential. If an individual walked into a rural school district with organizational leadership knowledge and skills but had never walked in the shoes of those they are leading, it is unlikely those being led would follow.

Because I had the opportunity to work and lead in a school district while wearing many hats, I developed the experience to fulfill the legal requirements and to provide educational support related to special education, classroom instruction, curriculum, middle school, 4K, and early childhood programs, career and technical education (CTE), youth apprenticeships, alternative education, and much more. I was also responsible for fulfilling the district's legal obligations under federal law for essential federal grant programs designed to support students with specific needs, such as Federal IDEA grants supporting students with disabilities, Title I, Every Student Succeeds Act, Title II, supporting professional development, Title III, supporting English language learners, Title IV, ensure safe and healthy students and effective use of technology to improve academic achievement and digital literacy and the Perkins CTE Grant.

Understanding these needs helped me be an effective leader in my district for my kids, staff, parents, and in my community. A system that does not require district administrators to obtain state certification could harm school districts by exposing them to legal risks, depriving school district communities of valuable professional expertise, removing an important layer of accountability, reducing an important staffing safety net amid severe staffing shortages in many districts, and weakening the school leadership profession by lowering the standards to which the profession holds itself.

We ask the authors of this bill to reconsider their present approach to SB 335 and recraft the bill by working with DPI and Institutes of Higher Education to create a bill that does not expose school districts to possible litigation and, most importantly, supports district leaders who have a strong educational background so they can provide a strong educational system for kids and communities.

Therefore, WiRSA is opposed to SB335 as written.

Thank you for your time.

Jeffrey S. Eide

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